



STATE OF CONNECTICUT

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



Connecticut General Assembly Appropriations Committee Testimony of Commissioner Dianna R. Wentzell February 21, 2017

Thank you Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Senator Formica, Representative Ziobron and members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Dianna Wentzell, and I am the Commissioner of the Department of Education. I appreciate being given the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the Governor's proposed 2018-2019 biennial budget, as it pertains to the Department.

I would like to start by saying how thankful I am to Governor Malloy, and to the Legislature, for continuing to make education a priority in the State of Connecticut, as well as supporting the Department in our mission to ensure equity and excellence in education for all students, in accordance with the State Board of Education's 5 Year Comprehensive Plan. The decisions you will have to make over the next four months will not be easy, but I am committed to working with you and with Governor Malloy throughout this budgetary process, where education will obviously take a very prominent role.

As the Governor said two weeks ago in his budget address, we owe all children in the State of Connecticut a quality education - regardless of zip code. As such, he has proposed significant changes for distributing education funding that helps to ensure that we are delivering on that promise. The Governor's proposed Education Cost Sharing (ECS) changes focus on three key areas: 1) the impact of poverty; 2) the ability to pay; and 3) utilizing current enrollment. The Governor has also renewed his commitment to special education by separating that funding from general education aid, combining it with the Excess Cost – Special Education grant and adding an additional \$10 million dollars to the grant. All of these changes will help to create a more transparent and equitable approach, which will better serve all of our students.

Despite fiscal challenges, I am very grateful to Governor Malloy for maintaining current funding levels for the Alliance Districts. This continued investment reaffirms our commitment to revitalizing high-need districts, which impact 200,000 students, at more than 400 schools in 30 districts across our state. The Governor's proposed budget also maintains funding for the Commissioner's Network schools, which represent a pledge between local stakeholders and the Department to dramatically improve student achievement in up to 25 schools.

Under the proposed budget, the Department will see a reduction of \$3.35 million in our personal services line item. That includes a \$1.7 million dollar transfer, which represents the reassignment of a number of staff from our Department to the Connecticut Technical High School System central office. These are staff members who are currently employed by the Department, but who presently work to support CTHSS. We believe this transfer will help to assist in the efforts being undertaken by Speaker Aresimowicz, and other members of the General Assembly, to move to a strong, independent and sustainable Connecticut Technical High School System.

This budget proposal consolidates similar programming into singular line items which will support the Department's work in a more coordinated and flexible manner. The Department will take the opportunity to evaluate the consolidated programs and determine the best, most efficient way to align the delivery of the dollars in a way that maximizes services for children. Similarly, our proposed consolidation with the Office of Higher Education will allow us to partner closely with them to share resources and continue to align the K-12 system with postsecondary education to increase levels of college and career readiness.

We understand the ongoing need for shared sacrifice during these difficult times and we stand ready to do our part, while continuing to implement policies that work toward closing the achievement gap, elevating learning, and acting in the best interests of the children of the State of Connecticut. Having said that, I would caution, that if further reductions are proposed by the General Assembly that go beyond the Governor's recommendations, we will need to reevaluate the programs we currently offer to determine if any will have to be suspended in order for us to maintain our core mission to the children of our state and to carry out our daily charges.

The Governor's budget proposal is step one in a very long process. As we move forward, the Department is prepared to work with the legislature to provide whatever guidance or information you will need to make informed decisions to ensure equity and excellence in education for all students.

Again, I appreciate being given the opportunity to testify before you today, I look forward to working with you and the Governor this session and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.